Tales of the Black Cloth, Part 2 August 21

Funny how things you think should really interest people don't even cause an eye to blink and those things you think will elicit only a yawn really hit a nerve. The CCH had that experience [in 2003] when we posted an article in the NSA Daily on the use of black cloths as security devices several decades ago. A sizeable number of readers responded to the article with their recollections of how, where, and when black cloths were used.

Some of you may remember that in the 1960s, 1970s and-as a couple of readers recollected-the 1980s, NSA's Security Organization authorized the use of lengths of black cloth spread over classified material on desktops as a means of protecting it. In bureaucratic parlance, this was known as "precluding visual access," and the cloths were meant to prevent cleaning crews and other unauthorized folks from viewing, intentionally or unintentionally, classified documents.

A reader who was a security officer in the 1970s recalled that the purpose of the black cloth actually went beyond shielding material from the cleaning crews. He told us that the reason for specifying black cloth was "to signal to the Marine guards who inspected work areas after hours that the classified material was under control, and not just lying around. Those who tried to protect their classified material by other means, such as by putting it under a desk blotter, received security violations."

Another reader remembered the following creative use for the black cloth; it involved the removable hard drives in his office's state-of-the-art PC XTs. "The drives were supposed to be removed and locked up each evening, as a security measure. Unfortunately, while the drives were indeed 'removable', they quite often weren't 'reinsertable'; we had a failure rate approaching 50% every time the drives were removed and replaced. To avoid this problem, people with these drives would leave them inserted permanently, and simply throw a black cloth over the CPU each night, thereby rendering the system 'secure'."

Other commenters pointed out that some of the black cloths were fireproof.

One correspondent remembered that "a co-worker (a smoker) demonstrated...that you couldn't catch her black cloth on fire even with a lighter." (Boys and girls, don't try this at home!)

Another memory, with both whimsical and practical aspects, was shared by another reader: "Many years ago my branch chief asked me to find a missing employee. After an extensive search, I found her asleep, completely covered by a black cloth-the perfect camouflage. This, of course, became part of the history of the office."

One employee related that in the Ops Building black cloths were used to seal the heating and air conditioning vents whenever the temperature got too uncomfortable. In our *History Today* article, we made the comment that black cloths could be used as capes when the office became a bit chilly. This use surprised one of our readers, who asked, with tongue in cheek, "Did such people not realize that they risked permanent invisibility-except to us cleared guys, of course." The same reader commented that we had missed the main point about black cloths: "Uncleared personnel not only could not see through it...but could not physically lift it, since they lacked a clearance. Thus did we foil spies, the Red Menace, and their evil allies. That is why it was also called 'magic cloth'."
We thank all those who take the time to comment on our History Today articles. Please keep those cards and letters (and e-mails) coming.

 These comments were compiled by Barry Carleen shortly after our 2003 *History Today* article. Barry was chief of our publications team; he passed away in 2016 and he is missed.